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ABSTRACT

In an effort to meet the accrediting criteria of the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges, South Carolina Technical College undertook a comprehensive external evaluation of its continuing education program. Both process and products associated with the continuing education program were assessed using newly-generated and existing data. Additionally, a practical model of program evaluation was developed to ensure that the institution would continue to meet accrediting requirements. The process used in developing the model included a survey of faculty and administrators, a sampling of course evaluations, analysis of qualitative information in the institution's database, and examination of advisory committee meeting minutes. The resulting model includes these components: establishment of mission, goals, and standards and continual documentation of related meetings; determination of at least one outcome standard for each goal; assessment of program effectiveness in terms of these standards, based on the above process; implementation of needed changes; and review of the mission, goals, and standards. It is concluded that the model offers a well-rounded and thorough approach to assessment satisfactory to any accrediting body. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/MSE)

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Assessing Continuing Education: Difficult but not Impossible

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Jean Endo
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

Abstract

Since 1985 assessment and accountability have been part of the accreditation or re-accreditation considerations of the various regional accrediting bodies. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) was among the first to incorporate assessment into their criteria. As a result SACS standards have lead the others in their assessment expectations. In an effort to meet SACS criteria a comprehensive evaluation of the continuing education program of a two-year Technical College in South Carolina was undertaken by two external evaluators. Both the process and the products associated with the continuing education program were assessed by using newly generated and existing data. Additionally, a practical model was developed to ensure the institution would continue to meet SACS requirements. The methodology and proposed model should prove useful to two- and four-year colleges and universities desiring to enhance their programs and to meet evaluation requirements of any accrediting body.

Assessing Continuing Education: Difficult but not Impossible

Introduction

In 1985, Dr. William Bennett, who was Secretary of Education at the time, commented in the Chronicle of Higher Education, that "Colleges should state their goals, measure their success in meeting those goals and make the results available to everyone." This comment sounds relatively innocuous and would probably elicit agreement from the general public. However, Secretary Bennett went on to say that "If institutions don't assess their own performance, others-either states or commercial outfits-will most likely do it for them" (1985, p. 25). Not surprisingly, most of the assumptions underlying this emphasis made their way into the Federal Register (1988) as Part 602 of the Secretary's Procedures and Criteria for Recognition of Accrediting Agencies. This move firmly implanted assessment and accountability in the accreditation or re-accreditation considerations of the various regional accrediting bodies. One of the first and most stringent accrediting bodies to fervently apply the Secretary's Criteria was the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). SACS is the accrediting body responsible for the colleges and universities in the Southeast and their requirements formed the basis for the evaluation described below. Because of the emphasis placed by SACS on the assessment and evaluation process, any institution which meets SACS criteria should have little difficulty in meeting the requirements of any of the 7 other regional accrediting bodies.

The Evaluation

An evaluation of the Continuing Education Program at a South Carolina Technical College was undertaken by two external evaluators. It was the evaluators' understanding that this was to be the first comprehensive evaluation of the program. The evaluation was requested to assist the college in preparation for a SACS re-accreditation visit, provide administrators with feedback on the effectiveness of the continuing education program, and to provide a model for continuous evaluation and operations. The process used to conduct the baseline evaluation and develop the evaluation model is offered as a realistic approach to begin or refine program assessment methodology.

Data Gathering

In initial discussions with representatives of the Technical College, it was agreed that multiple measures would be used to determine the effectiveness of the program and to develop a continuous evaluation model. The use of multiple measures in assessment has been advocated by numerous authors (Bogue, 1992; Ewell, 1983; Nichols, 1991; Underwood, 1991) and Underwood specifically recommends the identification and use of existing assessment data. The measures selected for this evaluation included generation of new data through surveys and analysis of existing data such as database elements, committee minutes, and historical course evaluations.

All agreed that advisory committee members and department heads would be surveyed regarding the effectiveness of Continuing Education in meeting its mission and to identify specific strengths and weaknesses. In addition to the surveys, the evaluators agreed to review a sample of course evaluations and advisory committee minutes from a one year period, and to explore the current database to determine if meaningful data existed there. Once the evaluation was underway the Technical College representatives suggested the evaluation should also include surveying specific faculty with knowledge of both credit and non-credit courses. As a result, three separate surveys were designed and administered. One follow-up mailing was used with each survey group.

The Technical College was made up of six separate divisions, each headed by a Director and each receiving input from an Advisory Committee made up of people from business and industry, community leaders, etc. The departments included Business and Human Services, Enterprise Development, Health Care, Career Development, Licensing and Recertification, and Applied Microelectronics.

The three groups (Department Heads, Directors, and Faculty with knowledge of both credit and non-credit programs) were surveyed using consistent items so that comparisons of responses could be made. The survey items were developed by the evaluators and were provided to the Dean of Continuing Education for concurrence prior to finalizing the instruments. The

surveys were formatted to look like other surveys used by the Technical College to aid in the consistency of response and to avoid confusion about whether the survey was "official". The respondents were assured of confidentiality and to further enhance the confidentiality aspect, the return address envelopes were addressed to the evaluators, not to the Technical College.

Survey Results

The overall response rates varied slightly by group and ranged from 65% to 75%. Response categories included Advisory Committee Process, Instruction, Instruction and Service, and Facilities and Equipment. The specific responses were reported to the Technical College; however, for the purpose of this report it will suffice to say the responses were overwhelmingly positive with average responses varying by group. Generally, Department Director responses were less positive than those of either the Advisory Committee Members or the Faculty. The lowest ratings went to Facilities and Equipment with the advisory Committee Process receiving the highest ratings. When asked to compare credit and non-credit courses faculty rated the non-credit courses slightly higher with a significant difference in Facilities and Equipment.

Course Evaluation Findings

In an effort to use existing data as part of the Continuing Education evaluation at the Technical College, course evaluations were sampled. For the purposes of the evaluation, the records for all non-credit courses taught over a one-year period were identified. All courses taught between May of 1994 and June 1995 were used to provide the analysis which follows. One thousand thirty-one courses were taught during the period used for the evaluation. A stratified random sample was generated using a table of random numbers (Kerlinger, 1973) to identify the courses which would be checked for evaluations. Each of the six divisions was used as a stratum and was separately sampled at a 10% rate. Stratifying the sample assured that all of the divisions were represented at the same rate. Since this was an actual random sample, the percentages providing evaluation records and the percentages in the rating of the courses, should be indicative of the entire population of the year being analyzed (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996).

The first observation to be gained from this portion of the evaluation was the divisions were not consistent in their use of course ratings. The percentage of courses which had evaluations on file ranged from 100% for Applied Microelectronics to 0% for Enterprise Development, with an overall rate of 60%.

Of the courses in the sample, three different types of evaluation forms were used. In one, using a four point scale, participants rated the courses on instructor knowledge, instructor presentation skills, the overall value of the training, and training facilities. The choices used on the scale for this instrument were: Excellent, Good, Average, and Poor. A maximum of 803 participants rated the courses according to the scale just described.

In a second set of course ratings, using a different four point scale, participants rated the courses on the instructor knowledge, presentation of course material, instructor organizational skills, promptness of class meetings, training facility/classroom, tuition appropriateness, and time sufficient for the course. The choices used on the scale for the second type of instrument were: Excellent, Good, Average, and Fair. A maximum of 143 participants rated the courses according to the scale just described.

Only 11 courses that had ratings used something other than the scales described above. Those eleven courses were all from the Microelectronics Division and a short answer, open-ended format was used. It is notable that the later, more open-ended, instrument appeared to produce the most instructive responses. The summary forms that were found in the files were converted to frequencies to provide an indication of how the courses were rated. The overall responses gathered from these traditional instruments could be characterized as positive but provided little evidence of areas that could be improved. In contrast, the written comments provided on the Microelectronics course evaluations suggested participants were satisfied with the offerings but gave specific guidance as to areas needing attention.

Database Report Results

It is always prudent when conducting an evaluation to consider items and methods which may already be in existence rather than having to continually develop new sources of data

(Underwood, 1991). This approach allows for the allocation of minimal resources while providing for the use of multiple measures. Since no single indicator is considered sufficient to provide an overall indication of the strength or weakness of a program, evaluators are challenged to provide cost-effective means to develop multiple measures. Often the databases which are used in everyday operation, not having been designed to be used in a program effectiveness scheme, are of limited or no use in providing data on which a program might be evaluated. Therefore, the suggestion of the possibility of using the existing database was greeted with skepticism when it was first discussed as a possibility in this evaluation because of its recognized limitations.

The evaluators' analysis of the database yielded nothing directly related to the quality of the offerings of the Continuing Education Program, however it was possible to document several aspects of mission fulfillment by the Continuing Education Program and to provide information relative to planning efforts. According to Bogue (1992) evidence of mission fulfillment is evidence of the quality of an institution. As an example of how that might be demonstrated by the database, reference was made to the "Status Report" which was requested by the evaluators to allow the selection of a sample of courses for the purpose of checking the evaluations. The status report was a printout which identified the following variables: SES, COURSE NUMBER, COURSE TYPE, COURSE TITLE, BUILDING CODE, LOCATION, COUNTY, START DATE, END DATE, NUMBER OF STUDENTS, CONTACT HOURS, INCOME, INST COST, OTHER COSTS, NET, CO-SPONSOR, WHO FOR, TOTAL CRS HOURS, and REC #.

One aspect of the mission of the Technical College studied was to provide courses that meet the needs of business and industry. That could be documented by generating lists on the variable WHO FOR. Those lists could be broken out by year and the frequencies of requests could be tracked to indicate growth over years as well as additions of new requesters, etc. Additionally, if the same requester continues to show up from year-to-year, that would provide a strong indication that the training being provided is meeting the client's need.

Another possibility existed since the COURSE NUMBER contains a three digit code which identifies the division providing the training. Similarly to the first example, a sort could be done by division that would allow for documentation of the efforts of that division in providing training. Again, this type of report could be generated annually or more frequently and the numbers at each point would provide trend data indicating growth or decline in service provided and to whom.

The LOCATION variable offers another possibility for documenting service. An analysis of that variable would provide an indication of the geographic area being served or identify areas which might require outreach since there has been no training provided there.

These examples are not meant to be all inclusive of the possibilities. However, as simplistic as these suggestions may appear, they provide a means to document both mission fulfillment and to provide information which can be used for planning or for determining if an existing plan is being followed. Alone, this will not provide strong enough evidence of the quality of the program, however, it is yet another indicator and can add strength to the rest of the evaluation or planning effort.

Committee Minutes Results

Committee minutes, which represented one year of advisory committee meetings, were examined to determine if they could be used as part of an evaluation of the Continuing Education Program. It did not appear that the minutes provided a strong enough link between the goals of the Committee and the outcomes of the Continuing Education Program. However, having the committee minutes on file did provide documentation of the level of activity of the committee. Additionally, it appeared from both the comments on the surveys used as part of this evaluation, as well as in a review of the minutes provided, that these advisory committees make suggestions and provide expertise which results in changes to courses and offerings.

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Model Development

Evaluation of Current Assessment Program

In developing a model assessment program for the Technical College, the evaluators compared and contrasted the current assessment efforts with SACS criteria. Section III of the Criteria for Accreditation of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (1992) states that "the level of institutional quality depends not only on the educational processes and resources, but also on the institution's successful use of those processes and resources to achieve established goals. ...An institution **has an obligation** [emphasis in original document] to all constituents to evaluate effectiveness and to use the results in a broad-based, continuous planning and evaluation process" (p. 15). Although no specific format for the planning and evaluation process is prescribed, broad based involvement from faculty, staff, students and administration is mandated. An effective assessment process must also include:

1. the establishment of a clearly defined purpose appropriate to collegiate education;
2. the formulation of educational goals consistent with the institution's purpose;
3. the development of procedures for evaluating the extent to which these educational goals are being achieved, and
4. the use of the results of these evaluations to improve institutional programs, services and operations. (p.16)

The SACS exhortation to formulate educational goals consistent with the institution's purpose requires much greater clarity in the specificity of purpose statements than historically provided in either mission or vision statements. Additionally, the SACS contention that planning and evaluation processes must be designed to demonstrate that the institution's purpose and role are being fulfilled, indicates that (1) the ultimate determination of institutional effectiveness is in relation to the statement of purpose and that (2) demonstration of institutional effectiveness is through the accomplishment of goals and expected educational results that are clearly linked to the institution's stated purpose. In the Evaluation section of the Resource Manual (1992) institutions are encouraged to:

> strive not only to use explicit language but also (1) to specify appropriate time frames (e.g., for periodic assessment, for achievement of particular goals over several years, etc.); (2) to address both minimum standards and targets for excellence; (3) to indicate at what level (e.g., program, department, division, institution, etc.) the assessment will be conducted and used; and (4) to designate responsibility for implementing evaluation and for ensuring appropriate use of evaluation results (pp. 9-10).

A review of a draft planning document recently prepared by the Continuing Education Division indicated compliance with many of the requirements specified by the SACS Criteria for Accreditation (1992). As is often the case, the evaluators found the Technical College to lack documentation of a "continuous planning and evaluation process" and the "use of the results of these evaluations to improve institutional effectiveness". Also, the institution's draft document did not provide an indication that the planning process had "broad-based involvement of faculty, staff, students and administration" as required by SACS (1992). Furthermore, a review of the entire assessment efforts of the Technical College revealed a somewhat typical pattern. Many aspects of an effective assessment effort were in place but they were fragmented and poorly documented. Additionally, emphasis was being placed on process and not outcomes. With administrators and faculty overwhelmed with the daily demands of their programs it is not surprising that their assessment efforts were not comprehensive. The evaluators attempted to provide a broad framework for continuous assessment by suggesting ways to integrate effective techniques into the routine processes underway at the institution. The following recommendations are provided to illustrate the type of integration needed by many programs.

Specific Assessment Recommendations

Statement of Purpose: The Continuing Education Division had a clear statement of purpose which appeared to be appropriate for the mission of the institution. It was suggested that an expedient approach to documenting the required broad-based involvement would be to use minutes of meetings, agenda items, or other routine methods. Integrating this evidence into existing documentation could be accomplished on an on-going basis with minimal effort.

Goals and Standards: The goals of the Division were clearly spelled out and included standards. However, the majority of the standards, as listed by the institution, were "process" rather than "outcomes" standards. Process goals and standards are necessary since effective processes can lead to effective outcomes. However, documenting that a process is in place does not provide proof that the result expected from the process is the result actually being obtained. For example, the institutions GOAL 1 was, "to assess and meet the lifelong learning needs of the service region". There are actually two commitments made by this goal. One is to assess the lifelong learning needs of the service region. This aspect of the goal is process oriented. The institution must know what the needs are before they can be met. Meeting the needs is the second part of the goal and is much more outcome oriented.

In reviewing the four standards associated with this first goal, it appeared that three were process standards inasmuch as they referred to steps to be taken to validate the assessment of needs. The outcome portion of the goal, meeting the needs, was not as clearly identified in a standard statement. The standard most appropriate to this aspect of the goal was standard four, dealing with certification examinations. As it was worded, that standard was process oriented as well since it provided that the certification examinations would be "monitored". An outcome standard, if the training is to help participants pass certification examinations, would be that a percentage (to be determined by the faculty and administration) of those taking the certification examinations would pass.

The evaluators emphasized the need to have broad-based participation by faculty and administration in their development of the statement of purpose, goals and standards. It was suggested that this could be documented again through routine minutes of meetings, agenda items, or other existing methods. Furthermore, the evaluators advised the institution that written documentation would not be sufficient to meet these criteria. The institution should anticipate SACS reviewers asking faculty whether they had input into the process.

Designation of the Responsibility for Evaluation and Use of Evaluation Results: Each of the standards in the draft document had identified a position (Director, Dean, etc.) responsible for carrying out the evaluation. However, it was not clear who would be responsible for documenting the use of the results. The evaluators suggested specifically identifying responsible parties.

Multiple Measures: As has already been mentioned most of the authorities on assessment and evaluation recommend the use of multiple measures (Bogue, 1992; Ewell, 1983; Nichols, 1991; Underwood, 1991). A limitation of the standards as they were stated, partially a result of the process nature of most of them, was that they consisted of counts or other types of verification that a process happened; not that a desired result for which the process was developed was actually obtained.

Unfortunately, outcomes based standards are often more difficult to document and are more likely to require the use of multiple measures. For example, if the standard, as in Goal 1 Standard 2 is to assure at least 40 business/industry visits per year, then the only measure necessary is a count of how many visits were made and a comparison with the stated figure of 40. However, if the outcomes oriented portion of the GOAL 1 is addressed, the methods are not quite so clear. For example, in GOAL 1 the second portion is to meet the lifelong learning needs of the service region. This goal would require documentation that the needs have been met. Finding out what the needs are and providing appropriate classes are processes which may lead to the successful completion of the goal of meeting the needs, however, those processes do not document that the needs were in fact met.

One method, suggested by the evaluators, to address the outcomes' portion was to use a measure of client satisfaction. In other words, ask them. In this case there would be at least three clients who would be the focus; (1) the individuals who took the courses, (2) the business or industry who requested the courses, and (3) community leaders who have knowledge of the types of training needed and the type being provided.

In short the evaluators recommended the institution :

1. Document all faculty and administration meetings to develop or update the purpose statement, goals, and standards.
2. Recognize that the goals and standards document is considered to be a "living" document and that it should be updated regularly. The focus could initially be on three or four major goals related to the most pressing issues. After a determination of how well those goals are being met, the document should be updated with some goals dropped and others added. Over a period of years, all major goals could therefore be evaluated without overtaxing the ability to collect and analyze data.
3. For each goal there should probably be at least one outcome standard.
4. Course evaluations should be used with every course and filed. Some portion of the course evaluations should probably be standardized to provide input which can be compared across divisions. The standard portion should be designed to collect data specifically related to the division goals. For example, if an expected outcome is that the training provided will meet the participant's needs, a question such as "To what degree did the course meet your needs?" could be asked with a rating scale attached. Although this is self-report data, it provides evidence of goal attainment if the goal of the training is to meet participant needs. Additional survey items could gather information relative to specific departmental goals.

There should be someone specifically charged with analyzing at least a sample of the course evaluations on a regular basis, perhaps annually. That person could make recommendations for improvements in each of the areas evaluated (or no changes if none are needed) at a department or division meeting. The results could be discussed, reported in the minutes and filed in such a way as to provide a paper trail documenting that the evaluation results were discussed by faculty and administration and the uses made of the information, particularly where changes are made as a result.

5. The Advisory Committee members should be provided with an evaluation opportunity on a regular basis, perhaps every two years. Since the committees are made up of business and industry leaders, as well as community members, they can respond as to the types of training needed and the types being provided. This would provide input from an additional set of clients. Again, the instrument should ask questions which are directly related to the goals of the Continuing Education Program.

   The suggestion was made earlier regarding the use of minutes from the Advisory Committee meetings. That suggestion bears reinforcement here. The Advisory Committee provides input for planning as well as recommendations for program improvement; however, the link between those suggestions and the faculty/administration discussion and the implementation of the input is not documented clearly enough to show SACS that the link exists.

6. Business and Industry clients who request training should be surveyed on a regular basis. This would provide input from the third set of clients. Again, the survey should ask specific questions relative to the goals of the Continuing Education Division and possibly some questions which are specific to the department providing the training. A sample could be used to cut costs and the survey could be conducted on a three-year basis, to avoid conflicts with the schedule for surveying Advisory Committee members.

Suggested Model Outline

In an effort to clearly communicate the assessment model advocated for the Technical College, the an outline of the model was developed. It is offered here as a generic model that would be effective for most institutional programs.

I. Establish Mission, Goals and Standards

   Continually document meetings related to the mission, goals and standards.

II. Determine at Least One Outcome Standard for Each Goal

III. Assess Program Effectiveness Relative to Established Mission, Goals and Standards

   Examples

1. Course Evaluations (Annual Cycle)

   Do course evaluations regularly, file them consistently, ask questions directly related to the goals, standardize at least a portion of the evaluation for comparison purposes, allow for open-ended comments, review at least a sample annually and bring the findings back for discussion at the time of review of the mission, goals and standards document.

2. Advisory Committee Evaluation (2 Year Cycle)

   Survey the Advisory Committee members on a regular basis, perhaps every two years. Ask questions specifically related to the mission and goals. Bring the findings back to the next review of the mission, goals and standards document.

3. Constituent Evaluation (3 Year Cycle)

   Survey a sample of constituents, on a regular schedule. Every three years would probably be sufficient. Bring the findings to the review of the mission, goals, and standards document.

4. Administrative Database or Records Evaluation (Annual Cycle)

   Use the database to generate reports which will provide trend data regarding such variables as numbers of classes taught, location, for whom, etc. These reports can provide additional information for use in determining whether some of the goals are being met and also provide the population from which to choose a sample for the survey of constituents.

IV. Implement Needed Changes

Develop a method to create program improvements resulting from the assessment.

V. Review Mission, Goals and Standards

Set a regular schedule for reviewing the mission, goals and standards document in light of information coming in from the on-going evaluation; probably annually.

Conclusion

The model described above provides a well-rounded, thorough approach to assessment and evaluation that should satisfy SACS or any other accrediting body. Samples could be used to cut down on costs and resources, and the schedules of the various surveys can be manipulated to avoid becoming overwhelming. It is important to remember that for each goal and standard there is an expectation of collection of information and use of results.

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